

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

The Right of the Nation to Defend Itself

A Dispatch from Secretary Seward to Charles Francis Adams, Circular No. 20

Department of State, Washington, August 18, 1862

SIR: Ideas of appeal, mediation, and intervention seem to hold their place in the European mind, although their novelty has long since worn off. Our representatives abroad, therefore, under the apprehension that some form of interference may be attempted or adopted, frequently and urgently ask for information concerning the purposes of this government.

No foreign state has at any time communicated or intimated to us, in any way, a design, or even a disposition, to take a new attitude in regard to our domestic affairs. Generally the communications which we have received have been marked with directness and frankness. It would, therefore, imply an unbecoming and even unreal distrust on our part to assume that any hostile intentions are indulged by the maritime powers of Europe.

On the other hand, this government can at no time forget that foreign intervention is the inevitable result of long-continued domestic strife; nor can we forget that the existing attitude of all those powers was assumed without their having given us any previous notice; that it is anomalous, and, although unintentionally so, it is nevertheless practically unfriendly and injurious. The government, moreover, cannot affect to be ignorant that disloyal citizens of the United States are abroad, and that parties and masses are agitating Europe to induce or oblige its governments to intervene. Beside these circumstances, it must be remembered that the prosecution of civil war is attended by accidents which beget misapprehensions and excite passions and prejudices in foreign states. It is therefore our duty to act as if we supposed that some of the maritime powers, although they are not indeed waiting upon occasion, may yet, upon some unexpected vicissitude, be found directly or indirectly allied and cooperating with our internal enemies.

I think that the instructions which have issued from this department have not left our representatives any room to doubt that it is the determination of the government to defend the integrity of the country and maintain the Union, under all circumstances and against all who in any case may assail them. I think, moreover, that the magnitude and the character of our land and naval preparations indicate the same determination, which is

the result, not of variable impulses, but of fixed convictions and unchangeable principles.

Formal declarations of a policy, clearly enough revealed without them, are unnecessary and generally injudicious, because they provoke needless and often embarrassing criticism and debate.

Our representatives abroad are nevertheless entitled to understand, and sometimes it may be profitable for them to know, the grounds upon which a fixed and important policy is pursued.

While the nation is convulsed with a civil strife of unexampled proportions, it would be presumptuous, perilous, and criminal to court or provoke foreign wars. Reviewing the whole course of the existing administration, I may safely claim that it shows that, even if the government had been left at liberty to conduct its foreign relations, altogether irrespectively of the civil war, it would yet have chosen and maintained a policy of peace, harmony, and friendship towards all nations. It is certainly our especial care, under existing circumstances, to do no injustice, to give no offence, and to offer and receive explanations in a liberal spirit whenever they are possible, and thus to make sure that if, at any time, either accidentally or through the intrigues of the insurgents, we shall incur the misfortune of collision with foreign states, our position will then be one of pure and reproachless self-defence.

The nation has a right, and it is its duty, to live. Those who favor and give aid to the insurrection, upon whatever pretext, assail the nation in an hour of danger, and therefore they cannot be held or regarded as its friends. In taking this ground, the United States claim only what they concede to all other nations. No state can be really independent in any other position.

Willing, however, to avert difficulties by conciliatory explanations, we frankly confess to the conviction that either the insurrection must be subdued and suppressed or the nation must perish. The case admits of no composition. If we have no fear of failure, it is because we know that no other government than this could stand in this country, and that permanent dismemberment of it is impossible. The principal masses of the population are content with the present system, and cannot be brought to oppose or to surrender it.

The faction which is attempting to destroy it, although infatuated and energetic, is, relatively to the whole people, an inconsiderable one. The natural highways of the country, extended sounds and lakes, and long, widely branching rivers, combined with its artificial roads, are bonds which can neither be removed nor permanently broken by any mere political force whatsoever. The so-called Gulf States need the free use of all these highways, and those who dwell upon their borders will not consent to be shut out from the ocean. The wealth and patronage of the whole nation are needful to perfect civilization on the Pacific coast, and the Atlantic States must forever derive protection and support from the recesses of the continent. Those who are attempting to break up the Union must either substitute new commercial and social connections for the highways now existing, or they must invent and establish a new political system which will preserve them. Nature opposes the former project. The wit of man fails to suggest not merely a better political system, having the same objects as the present Union, but even any possible substitute for it.

If it be said that these arguments are disposed of by the fact that civil war has occurred in defiance of them. I answer that the civil war is not yet ended. If it be replied that at least there is a manifest danger of dissolution of the Union, I rejoin that the occurrence of the civil war at most proves only that in this country, as in every other, it is possible for faction to interrupt the course of civil administration and to substitute anarchy for law. I do not know that any wise man has ever doubted that possibility. Sedition is, as I suppose, a vice inherent and latent in every political state. But the condition of anarchy is not only anomalous but necessarily a transient one. I do not pretend to say how long the deplorable disturbances now existing here may continue, nor what extreme the anarchy which prevails in the southern part of the country may reach. It may be that the storm may continue one or more years longer, and that there may be a dissolution of society in that unhappy region. But after such a convulsion every state requires repose and again seeks peace, safety, and freedom; and it will have them, if possible, under the political system, which is best adapted to those ends. Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon, each in his time cast down established states and substituted new ones in their places. Yet the hand that made the violent change had hardly been withdrawn when the subverted states reappeared, standing more firmly than before on their ancient foundations.

It is freely admitted that the salvation of the Union depends on the will and the choice of the American people, and that they are now engaged in a fierce conflict upon that very question. But sooner or later there must come a truce, because civil war cannot be indefinitely endured. Will there then be reconciliation? It cannot happen otherwise. When such a time arrives, any society will prefer the attainable to the unattainable object, the greater to the lesser advantage, and will bury every domestic difference

to save itself from the worst of all political evils-foreign conquest and domination. The object of the insurgents is the fortifying and extending of African slavery. Is the object, under existing circumstances, really attainable? Is it not becoming more manifestly impossible every day that the war is prolonged? Is even the continuance of slavery itself worth the sacrifices which the war has brought? It is assumed that the insurgents, however erroneously, are determined upon that point. I reply, that it is always a class, or a sect, or a party, and not the whole country, that provokes or makes civil war, but it is not the same class or sect or party, but the whole country that ultimately makes the peace; and hence it has happened that hardly one out of a hundred attempted revolutions has ever been successful. Is not this the instruction of the civil wars of England, France, and San Domingo?

The consideration that this is a republican state has been heretofore impressed upon the correspondence of this department, and it cannot be too steadily kept in view by our representatives in Europe. Precisely because it is both a federal and a republican state, with its cohesion resulting from the choice of the people in two distinct processes, the nation must cease to exist when a foreign authority is admitted to any control over its counsels. It must continue to be jealous of foreign interventions and alliances, as it always heretofore has been.

The nation, moreover, is an American one. It has maintained pleasant and even profitable intercourse with the states of the eastern continent; but it nevertheless is situated in a hemisphere where interests and customs and habits widely differing from those of Europe prevail. Among these differences this one at least is manifest: we neither have sought, nor can we ever wisely seek, conquests, colonies, or allies in the Old World. We have no voice in the congresses of Europe, and we cannot allow them a representation in our popular assemblies. All of the American States once were dependencies of European powers. The fact that it is necessary to discuss the subject of this letter sufficiently proves that even if those powers have relinquished all expectation of recovering a sway here that was so long ago cast off, yet the American nations have nevertheless not realized their safety against European ambition. For this reason, also, we must be left by foreign nations alone, to settle our own controversies and regulate our own affairs in our own American way.

If the forbearance we claim is not our right, those who seek to prevent our enjoyment of it can show the grounds upon which foreign intervention or mediation is justified.

Will they claim that European powers are so much more enlightened, more just, and more humane than we are, that they can regulate not only their own affairs but ours also, more wisely,

and more beneficially than we have done? How and where have they proved this superiority?

I cannot avoid thinking that the ideas of intervention and mediation have their source in an imperfect conception in Europe of the independence of the American nation. Although actual foreign authority has so long passed away, yet the memory of it, and the sentiment of dictation, still linger in the parental European states. Perhaps some of the American nations have, by their willingness to accept of favors, lent some sanction to the pretension. But certainly this will not be urged against the United States.

We have too many proofs that our independence is by no means pleasing to portions of European society. They would, however, find it difficult to justify their dislike. That independence was lawfully won, and it has been universally acknowledged.

Is our peculiar form of government an offence? It was chosen by ourselves and for our own benefit, and it has not been enforced by us, nor can it in any case be enforced, upon any other people. Our own experience has proved its felicitous adaptation to our condition, and the judgment of mankind has pronounced that its influences upon other nations are beneficent. The severest censure has found no defect in it, except that it is too good to endure.

What plea for intervention or mediation remains? Only this, that our civil war is inconvenient to foreign states. But the inconvenience they suffer is only incidental, and must be brief; while their intervention or mediation might be fatal to the United States. Are not all civil wars necessarily inconvenient to foreign nations? Must every state, when it has the misfortune to fall into civil war, forego its independence and compromise its sovereignty because the war affects its foreign commerce? Would not the practice upon that principal result in the dissolution of all political society?

But it is urged that the war is protracted. What if it were so? Do our national rights depend on the time that an insurrection may maintain itself? It has been a war of fifteen months. The battle field is as large as Europe. The dynamical question involved

is as important as any that was ever committed to the issue of civil war. The principles at issue are as grave as any that ever were entrusted to the arbitration of arms. The resources opened by the government, the expenditures incurred, the armies brought into the field, and the vigor and diligence with which they are maneuvered, have never been surpassed; nor has greater success, having due regard to the circumstances of the case, ever been attained.

Notwithstanding these facts, Europeans tell us that the task of subduing the insurrection is too great, that the conclusion is already foregone, and the Union must be lost. They fail, however, to satisfy us of either their right or their ability to advise upon it, while they no longer affect to conceal the prejudices or the interests which disqualify them for any judgment in the case.

Finally, the advocates of intervention are shocked by the calamities we are enduring, and concerned by the debts we are incurring, yet they have not one word of remonstrance or discouragement for the insurgents, and are busy agents in supplying them with materials of war. We deplore the sufferings which the war has brought, and are ready and anxious to end the contest. We offer the simple terms of restoration to the Union, and oblivion of the crimes committed against it so soon as may be compatible with the public safety.

I have expressed these views of the President to our representatives at this time, when I think there is no immediate danger of foreign intervention, or attempt at mediation, to the end that they may have their due weight whenever, in any chances of the war, apprehensions of foreign interference may recur.

I am, sir, your obedient servant.

WILLIAM H. SEWARD

Source

United States Department of State, *Message of the President of the United States to the two houses of Congress, at the commencement of the third session of the thirty-seventh congress*, Vol. I [Washington, D.C.: 1862]

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